

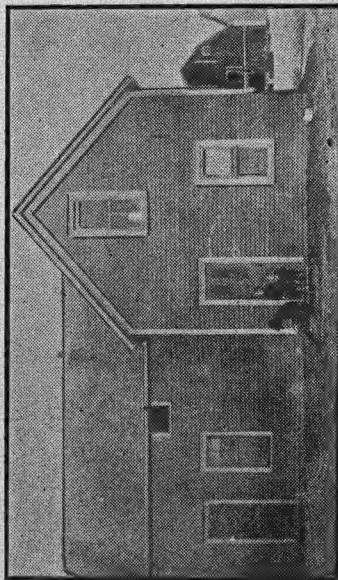
BEGINNINGS BACK OF

FIRST

THINGS

FIRST

"HOPING FOR NOTHING"



BARNYARD CAMPUS—1922

FIRST THINGS FIRST

(The following account—simple, touching, and "homey"—is by Hector Kirk of the Sudan Interior Mission. The lives of his parents, known to us as "Grandma and Grandpa" Kirk, are a challenge to every Christian.—L. E. M.)

In the little prairie town of Three Hills, Alberta, stands a monument to God's wisdom and power. In this day when human power and intellect are well-nigh worshipped, God still chooses to use the things weak and foolish, base and despised, yea, the things which are naught to bring to naught the things that are. In His use of the weak and unreckoned, God rebukes cold, calculating unbelief and "gives the lie" to lukewarm Christianity.

The Prairie Bible Institute, interdenominational, is now one of the largest Bible Schools in America. The enrolment for 1946-47 is as follows: 700 in the Bible School, 340 in the High School, and 90 in the Grade School.

Staff members now number 85, all of whom work voluntarily without salary. There is a gospel broadcast from the school each

Sunday morning. Many thousands of copies of the school paper, *The Prairie Overcomer*, are sent out each month without specific charge. During the summer scores of graduates and undergraduates go forth to labour under their various auspices, especially under the Canadian Sunday School Mission. They carry the Word of God far and wide into needy districts of Canada and the United States. Since its beginning in 1922 over 275 young people have gone from the Prairie Bible Institute to foreign mission fields. And the present indications are that this Institute may experience still further phenomenal growth in the near future.

It is not our purpose to go more into detail about this work, but rather to give an insight into the story behind the beginning of the work and to tell something of the humble instruments God used to lay foundations and establish principles which have become basic in this work.

Away back in 1878, in eastern Ontario, my father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Kirk, determined at the time of their marriage to put God first in their lives. They had little of this world's goods, and as children to the number of ten were born to them, there was a constant struggle on their farm for the bare necessities of life, especially during their first twenty years together.

Before her marriage our mother had suffered much on account of her health, but through suffering and disappointment she had gone very deep with God in consecration and faith. A book which came into her hand at that time, and which greatly influenced her life, was "The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life," by Hannah Whitall Smith. Its development of the truth that *all* things, including the wrongs and meannesses of fellow Christians, or even our own mistakes, God works together for our good, gripped Mother and gave her the Christian's heritage indeed—a happy life under any circumstances.

Another thing which Mother claimed from God was that, as she put it: "I will rear no children for the devil." She claimed Acts 16:31: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, *and thy house.*"

Before her marriage, Mother had volunteered for the mission field. She entered school to train for this service, but on account of poor health could not go abroad. Nevertheless, she kept her missionary vision bright to the end of her life.

Although we worked hard on a dairy farm, with its long hours, spiritual things were always put first. There was unhurried family worship twice a day, usually with comments on the reading, followed by an unhurried

prayer. The evening prayers were held immediately after the evening meal so as to be sure as possible that no one was absent. Incidentally, many a neighbour or helper on the farm had prayers with us. We heard no fairy tales at home, but Bible stories and missionary experiences were as familiar to us as "Jack and the Beanstalk" is to most children.

Church and Sunday School were as much a part of our lives as our regular meals and, I think, as much enjoyed. I am always amazed at people who excuse themselves and their children from attending church by saying, "I was forced to go as a child."

We not only attended the Sunday School of the local Presbyterian Church and the church service which immediately followed, but also attended a Sunday School in a needy district three miles from home, of which Father was founder and superintendent. All this, together with chores night and morning, made a very busy Sunday, but these spiritual activities were considered just as important as the size of the milk cheque or the getting in of the harvest-- and what a rich harvest it yielded!

I can still hear our neighbours saying, "I can't see how Andrew Kirk can find time to attend a church convention for three days during the summer time. I can't find it."

Whenever I think of my parents' lives and their dominating motives I am reminded of a phrase from an old hymn: "Ever live with eternity's values in view." One of Mother's favorite sayings was: "We find time for the things we value most."

As I visit our old community from time to time, I am often reminded of those dear neighbours, most of them Christians, who could not find time for these extra things for God. Some of them made a little more money, but, as often as not, put it into a bag with holes, or left it to worldly children to quarrel over.

My parents received a wonderful spiritual uplift through revival meetings held in our Presbyterian Church by Rev. Andrew Russell with his cousin, Walter Russell. My father said that the Holy Spirit came upon him at that time in such a way that his Bible became his meat day and night. Even material things looked different. The sky seemed brighter blue, the grass a fairer green, and a great joy filled his heart.

Since writing the above, an elder sister had told me of an incident in our parents' life—a very real fact in connection with the blessing they received at this time. As Father was seeking earnestly for the filling of the Holy Spirit, he was reminded by God of an unfulfilled obligation in connection with his father's will. This was not actual-

ly a legal liability, and he had persuaded himself that it was not even a moral obligation, but the Holy Spirit brought home to him forcefully that this was a debt to be paid. Mother agreed with him that this issue be met, though, with interest and compound interest over the intervening years, it amounted to \$500. The money was borrowed from a relative, and paid over. Only then did the longed for spiritual blessing fall.

It was interesting to me to hear Mother tell later on how she, too, sought this special emotional blessing, and would have made any sacrifice to obtain it, but that she had received nothing in the least ecstatic. To her was granted only a quiet deepening of her spiritual life. Nevertheless, in all the years that followed, Mother went on with God as fully, or even more so, than did Father.

This minister also led my parents into the life of sacrificial giving for foreign missions. He taught this by example as well as by precept. From a salary of \$750, he himself gave \$100 to foreign missions.

My father pledged \$100 a year, which meant a great deal to him in the poverty of those early days. To make up our pledge we went without butter for at least two years, and used feed flour for baking. All we ever had for breakfast was well-cooked

oatmeal porridge and milk. Father was led to take the insurance off his buildings, and not to insure his life as he had planned to do. He definitely took the Lord as Protector and Caretaker for the family. God met him in all these issues. All the time he lived on the farm with his large family there never was need to call a doctor. The buildings were never burned. Mother lived to be eighty-four, and Father to the age of eighty-seven. As a family we never lacked.

At that time it did require faith to give away year by year about all that could be made on the farm. To many it seemed foolish and even wrong.

But perhaps the hardest thing they had to bear at this time was the critical, uncomprehending attitude of neighbours, and particularly of relatives. Because things about our home were not as comfortable and prosperous looking as others, it was often said, "They don't care much about the refinements of life. They are the uncultured type." My grandmother—a prominent Christian worker, a good soul and very kind to us—used to say of my mother (when things got into a muddle because Father was away in God's work and there was very little money, and Mother refused to scold or complain), "Oh, Maria doesn't care!"

From such passages as I Cor. 4:8-13 it is evident that there are two distinct types of

believers often living side by side and both saved—but how different! Some believers live like kings, as though the Cross has already given place to the Kingdom. But others in apostolic succession seem “appointed unto death.” Like Paul they are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. They are “fools for Christ’s sake . . . are weak . . . are despised . . . are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things.” My parents were indeed “speckled birds” in the midst of the neighbours.

I well remember my uncle, himself a good Christian and an elder of the church, coming to Father to try to get him to be “*sensible*” in these things. He pointed out the danger of fanaticism, quoting Ecc. 7:16: “Be not righteous overmuch.” He directed Father’s attention to the fact that his children would need all he could give them for education, etc. When Father would not agree to stop giving at that rate, he quoted I Tim. 5:8: “If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel.” Father, knowing that God was leading him, only laughed at this, and Uncle left him, saying, “I’ll give you five years to get away from this foolishness.” But Father never did get over giving. He continued laying up treasure in Heaven as ardently and

as carefully as any financier invests in government bonds.

He and Mother used to say, "Be as careful in investing your Lord's money as you are in investing money in worldly business." They prayerfully sought guidance in these matters, and when they found evidence that any work they were supporting was no longer profitable in spiritual returns, they sought to give where they could be sure of eternal reward. What a joy they had in giving! And their prayers and interests naturally became world-wide. They loved to save to give as so many save to hoard.

Although my father had little academic education, he knew his Bible as few men know it. He had large portions committed to memory, and I have heard very few men lead a Bible class as well as he. Many were saved in his little Sunday School and went into full-time service for God.

I can recall, as a child, sometimes accompanying Father on errands of mercy, for which he took time from a busy life. Often he would slip some money into a needy hand as he said good-bye.

For years Father conducted cottage prayer meetings in our own and neighbouring homes. And he was always at the fore to help in special meetings of any denomination in the district. He was superintendent of the Methodist Sunday School for some years.

He began also to be in demand as a local preacher, filling pulpits for various ministers in the vicinity.

The absence of worry or anxiety in my mother's life and her quiet contentment were a source of wonder to all who knew her. This was not the result of a naturally easy-going temperament, nor of a trouble-free life, but of a wonderful faith and trust in God's love and power. Father's absence from the farm in Christian work often meant greatly increased responsibility and work for Mother in the home and on the farm, yet she always encouraged him to engage in such work.

Beginning about 1895, and for several years thereafter, Father spent his winters out in Manitoba preaching the gospel. He was promised \$3 50 per week by the Home Mission Board. Then came a period when he was not needed.

Meanwhile the Lord had done what Father always claimed He does for those who give to Him. God had given him back far more than he had given. We experienced a real degree of prosperity. But at such a time of testing many Christians are sidetracked. Their very God-given prosperity, given to those who sacrifice for Him, becomes a snare. We must keep re-investing our bonds in the Bank of Heaven.

I have no doubt that my father became at that time unduly taken up with making money. He still continued to give liberally (though not in proportion to his earlier giving), and also kept up his Christian work. But it was evident to some of us that his heart and mind were becoming absorbed in the farm. We had bought more land, had doubled the size of our farm, and were renting a neighbouring farm. But God is faithful and wondrously kind, and He dropped a reminder into the midst of this absorption in worldly things.

In 1907, when I was eighteen and the only boy left on the farm with Father, we were in the midst of getting off a large harvest when a letter arrived from the Presbyterian Board asking my father to go to the west that fall and continue his home mission work. Father immediately replied, saying that he could not get away. But God dealt with him. I am sure, too, that Mother said something. How often a wife turns the balance either way at such a crucial moment, and with what far-reaching results. Had Mother not helped Father to make this decision or, on the other hand, had she considered her own well-deserved comfort, or had she shrunk back from the responsibility and burden of caring for the home and family, the balance doubtless would have turned the other way. As it was, a few days later

Father said to me, "Hector, I feel I have not done right. If that call should ever come again, I would have to go. But it is not likely it will come, since I have told the Board that I am so involved here that I cannot go."

But how good God is! The following autumn we had just as great a harvest to gather—added to which the weather was wet, making it more difficult—when the same appeal came from the Church. In less than a week Father was on his way west. This was a turning point of tremendous importance to us all. I verily believe that, had this decision not been made then, we would have become just another respectable family! Father never came back to the farm. The Church ordained him and asked him to continue in full-time work in the west.

Then, a few years later Mother's struggle came. She had remained to care for the family at home. After a time Father found his health would not stand the work out west without a home, and it meant either he must give up the work, or Mother would have to go to be with him.

But there were three young girls at home needing a mother's care, the youngest only twelve. It was a real problem and only God could solve it. There were a few months in which to decide, and how well I recall a part of Mother's prayer at family worship

twice a day for guidance that "there might be no mistake and no uncertainty." When the time came, there was quiet assurance that she should go.

I can remember her reply to her many well-meaning Christian friends who opposed the idea. Many even said it was wrong. She would show from the Scriptures that we are exhorted to put nothing, not even our dearest loved ones, before the Lord's work. (Luke 14:25-35; 18:28-30). Then she would point out how many young girls were left motherless by death and yet came through all right, and that even in the west she would be where she could help and advise by letter at any time. But I know how much it cost Mother to go.

Thus my parents left the prospect of a prosperous life and a comfortable old age to serve God and take the gospel to settlers in the west—first in Manitoba, then in Saskatchewan, and later in Alberta, as the tide of settlers moved west. I visited them in 1910, 1915, and in 1918, and found them living in small shacks, but very happy in the service of Christ.

They had given up their home and family for God's service, but in the course of fifteen years the family was almost entirely gathered together again at Three Hills, Alberta. For several years Father was stationed near that town. When my parents

finally retired from active service, they were given a life lease of a little farm right among their loved ones. Had they remained in the east, it would have been to live out their lives with their family far away. It pays to follow God.

Their willingness to obey God regardless of the cost made a deep impression upon me and upon others of the family in the matter of giving to God's work and going into God's service. Outstanding among our early recollections is that of the saving of money in our home to make up our missionary pledge.

An incident which occurred about the time I visited my parents in 1910 indicates how fully God had freed my father from the desire for worldly possessions. They were then located in Saskatchewan, near the Alberta border, working largely among ranchers. But settlers were coming in fast. They were living in a small settlement on the main line of the C. P. R. The land nearby had all been homesteaded recently. But one quarter section—160 acres—was to be thrown open again because the homesteader had to leave before securing his title. Since the place was well located near the railway station, some of the homesteaders advised my father of the opportunity. They said, "Take it, or some stranger will get it. You will be stationed here for three years anyway, and you may as well

move your shack to this farm and live there, as to live where you are, thus fulfilling the duties of a homesteader for the necessary three years' residence. Then if you do not want to farm it, when you have your title, we will buy it from you."

Father went to inspect it. But while he walked over it, God forcefully brought to his mind II Timothy 2:4: "No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier." He stopped short, went back to his friends and told them that he was not taking the homestead, *and why*.

After they retired from active home-missionary work and were living on the farm near Three Hills, they continued to give. During one year, after they were seventy years of age, they spent on themselves only \$80.00 while giving away \$1,000.00 to missions. They used to tell us they were leaving no money for us—to which all of us children heartily agreed. God gave Father and Mother the joy of giving, right up to the end of their lives, and they both expressed the wish that there be no money spent on their funeral. In homemade coffins their bodies await the resurrection of the just, and even that extra bit of money was saved for God's work and invested in saving souls. Their material possessions when they died,

if put up at auction, would not have brought \$25 00.

My brother Fergus, who is now President of the Prairie Bible Institute, had gone to the west as a homesteader at the age of eighteen. He had endured privation and worked hard till he became a successful farmer with many acres of good land and a complete tractor equipment, etc. He did not mind my going to Africa in 1918, but his own feeling was: "That may be all right for Hector, but not for me." He was a Christian, but he loved his possessions.

Shortly after that, God began to deal with him in a special way, and He did it by means of a man (Mr. Hamilton by name) who had been saved in Father's little Sunday School and led to give his life for missionary service in India.

During his furlough this missionary visited my brother's home at Three Hills while doing deputation work in the vicinity. My brother often drove him to his appointments in his car, and became greatly impressed by Mr. Hamilton's walk with God and his prayer life.

One evening Mr. Hamilton took for his text II Sam. 24:24: "Neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing." The text was borne home by the Spirit to my brother so strongly that he was all broken

up with weeping. Fearing that others would see him in tears, he slipped out and sat in his car. But even there he continued to weep. It was a visitation from God. There sprang up forthwith a great hunger for God's Word. He came to see that, although he had given hundreds of dollars at a time to God's work, he had never given anything that really cost.

With the approval of his godly wife he began to sell his land, quarter section after quarter section, just when nearly everyone was holding on to all the land he had, or was buying more.

As he sold his land, he gave the money away to the causes he knew were really doing God's work. His tractor and machinery went the same way, until he had only one quarter section and a few horses—enough to make a bare living. He told me later that he dared not make it known too openly what he was doing with his money, lest people think his mind was affected. What a reflection upon modern Christianity! Mother wrote me at that time concerning this: "Fergus is not drunk with wine, but is filled with the Spirit."

He gave himself to prayer and the study of the Word. He lived in his Bible. But his hardest test was yet ahead, for God said, "I want you to preach." That nearly finished him. He said, "Lord, I'll give my last cent

and do any kind of work for you, but preach I can't." And anyone who knew him as I did knew how humanly impossible it was for him to speak in public. I can honestly say I never knew a more sensitive, retiring disposition. To mention his name at meal-time when he was a lad would cause him to slip down and hide beneath the table. But God quietly insisted. There was nothing to do but preach or disobey, and already he had found under severe test the joy of obedience.

He lived a few miles out of Three Hills. Nine miles beyond was a schoolhouse. This seemed a good place to begin in a quiet way. After getting permission to use the schoolhouse, he went about and told the neighbours that he would conduct Sunday School there. The following Sunday quite a number came together. He said that service was the worst thing he had ever gone through, and he was sure no one would return the following Sunday. But they did return, and ere long it became easier, and even interesting, and then delightful to open the Word to interested classes.

Soon he was in demand as a local preacher. He has since taught in the Bible Institute. He now has a regular church service under the Presbyterian Church in the country. Upon him, particularly, was laid the burden of a few Bible Classes among the teen-age

children—grandchildren of Grandma and Grandpa. For, by this time a married sister and her husband, fearing to subject their large family to the temptations of the city, also moved to Thrée Hills to farm. They deliberately forsook financial gain for the spiritual good of their young ones. But how many parents follow the trail of Lot and "pitch their tent toward Sodom," regardless of the influence Sodom may have on their precious children! So few put God first in these matters. (These parents have already seen their reward, for of their family of nine all but one are in God's service, most of them foreign missionaries. And the ninth is in training).

By gathering together a few families who put Him first, God was preparing for the "School of the Prophets," which a little later He brought into being. Upon them came the common concern and burden for the young people of their families—the need of definite Bible teaching, together with the opportunity afforded by the long winter months when there is so little to do on the average prairie farm.

In a fair-sized empty house on my brother-in-law's farm, Bible-teaching classes were held during the winter of 1921-22. A real interest was awakened and the need of a qualified teacher was realized. Several of our family had studied at the Missionary

Training Institute, Nyack, N. Y., and a letter of appeal was sent to Dr. W. C. Stevens of the (then) Midland School of Kansas City, asking him if he could send a teacher. Dr. Stevens was deeply interested and put the need before a young graduate of his school. Rev. L. E. Maxwell responded and came to Three Hills in the fall of 1922.

From the human viewpoint there seemed little prospect of a Bible School developing at the village of Three Hills. In fact, a Bible School was not the ambition of these few folks. Their goal was God's will for their local young people. And nothing could so promote God's *will* as the study of God's *Word*. So, without money or special ability, without church or denomination to back the enterprise—yea, without the demand of a host of Christians for such a work, but with the one thing essential—this group of humble Christians became burdened with the need, and were willing to obey God at any sacrifice. Mr. Maxwell, too, had learned the secret of obedience. He rejoiced in the spiritual atmosphere he found at Three Hills and entered into the spirit of self-sacrifice. God was leading Mr. Maxwell and dealing with him—preparing a chosen vessel for His service. But that is a story by itself—as is the story of each one whom God has called through the years to serve at the Prairie Bible Institute.

Mr. Maxwell took his small salary for only two or three months, then said, "I have seen what you people are putting into God's work, and at what sacrifice. God's Word to me is 'Hoping for Nothing.' If you board me, I will trust the Lord for my other needs." Thus he set a precedent which continues in operation until today at the Prairie Bible Institute. No one serving in any capacity receives any salary—only board and room and medical attention. Special gifts earmarked for the Staff provide clothing, travel, and incidentals, etc. Would anyone have the secret of mighty constraining love for Christ? Here is the answer: First, by sacrifice; second, by sacrifice; third, by sacrifice.

While home on furlough during the winter of 1923-24 we attended many of the classes in that old farm house where about forty students of all ages were gathered each day for Bible study. Most of these came from the Three Hills district, but already there were a number from distant places. Then it was decided to build in the village.

By the utmost sacrifice of time and money the school has grown year by year, even during the years of the depression. It cost these supporters much. They have become "the poor of this world, rich in faith." Many of them put into the Bible Institute, and into their foreign missionary pledges, the

price of their cars while they walked to town or used horse and buggy.

Many from far and near have contributed in money, provisions, and labour, during the years. Practically all the work on the buildings has been done voluntarily. No debt is incurred. The Lord has gathered about the school a great and growing band of men and women of like mind, as workers, teachers, specialists, and Board members, all of whom give their utmost without salary. A spirit of joyful service and sacrifice pervades the place.

From the first the missionary cause was foremost and the giving each year was in the thousands. In the course of the years over \$300,000 has gone through the school treasury to interdenominational faith missions.

The lasting impression made upon one who knows the background and history of the Prairie Bible Institute is the marvel of what God can do even in this day of spiritual declension with the humblest persons who are unreservedly yielded to Him. Why is there not more of this sort of thing today? My brother Fergus said to me once in this connection, "Many earnest Christians go a long way with the Lord, but few go *all* the way."

While on the earth our Lord told His disciples that anything given for His sake

and the gospel's would be rewarded a hundredfold in this life, besides His gift of eternal life to all who believed on Him. He gave my parents the fullest kind of Christian life through their many years. He gave them many souls. How happy they were! Not only were all their children saved, but all are active in Christian work. And they lived to see about a score of their children and grandchildren in missionary service. So much received for so little! Yet some think that God is a hard master.

And with the example of such parents, how easy it was for their children to recognize and respond to God's demands upon them. I know the reaction upon my own life, and it was much the same with the others. For example, as a lad of fifteen I had, by dint of much hard work, earned enough money to buy a bicycle—the desire of my heart—and was just about to order it, when I felt that the Lord was asking me to give the money to foreign missions. It was a struggle, but it was only in line with what I had seen in our home, and so, although it was perhaps the equivalent of giving up a car to God today, I sent the money to Mr. Hamilton of India who was later used of God to touch my brother in the little school-house.

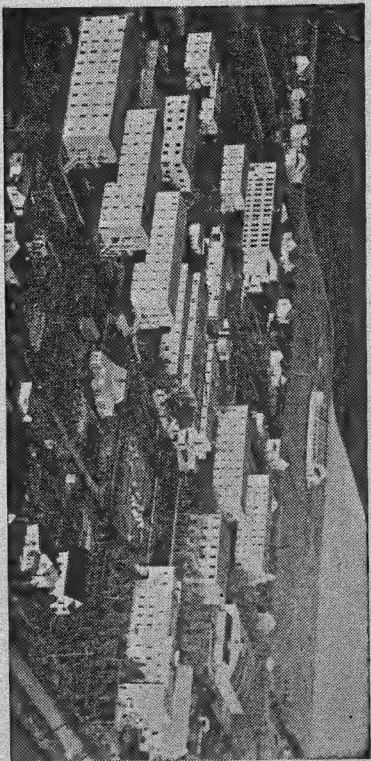
It was comparatively easy, I say, to follow our parents in the matter of yielding to God's service.

These memories and incidents are recorded only to show how through the years these souls consistently put God first. He not only used them to bring blessing to many, but prepared them for ever greater things. And how richly He rewarded them even in this life! May others be encouraged to obey God implicitly and explicitly, and press on for the highest.

My parents illustrate no case of marked *ability*, or even of special *opportunity*. What Christians could not have done what they did? God is no respecter of persons. He is longing to honour and use those who are willing to pay the price—for *it does cost*. But it pays!

"God has the best things for the few
Who dare to stand the test."





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